



## Friends of Blackwater Canyon

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Contact:

Judy Rodd, Friends of Blackwater, (304) 345-7663 (office); (304) 552-7602 (cell)

Mollie Matteson, Center for Biological Diversity, (802)-434-2388 (office); (802)-318-1487 (cell)

Mary Krueger, The Wilderness Society, (978) 342-2159 (office); (978) 502-9810 (cell)

### **Plan for Oil and Gas Drilling on Monongahela National Forest Jeopardizes Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area, Native Trout, Threatens Bat Populations Already Suffering From Deadly White-nose Syndrome**

CHARLESTON, W. Va.— Conservation groups filed an official protest Wednesday against a plan by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to auction off oil and gas leases on a sensitive area of the Monongahela National Forest. The proposed project is located in the Seneca Creek/Brushy Run area near the town of Onego. Part of the area to be drilled lies within the Spruce Knob Unit of the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area.

“Seneca Rocks is the icon of West Virginia’s mountain majesty. To imagine the view from her rocky crags despoiled by drill rigs and her native trout streams running red with waste water from gas wells fills me with horror!! Said Dr. John Harmon, avid trout fisherman and Pendleton County native.”

The groups fear the impact the oil and gas drilling will have on water quality and stream flows; native brook trout and other wildlife such as the endangered Cheat Mountain salamander and the West Virginia northern flying squirrel. Drilling operations will threaten economically important recreation resources as well, including the proposed wilderness in the Seneca Creek area; and will likely undermine the important outdoor recreational values of the national recreation area which is extremely important to local businesses and communities. The conservationists believe the federal government must also assess the risks of groundwater contamination; a number of residences served by well water are located adjacent to the national forest, near the project site. Similar oil and gas developments in other states have been found to contaminate private wells, threatening the health and safety of local residents.

The conservation groups are also concerned about the impacts the oil and gas drilling will have on bats, including the federally listed, endangered Indiana bat and Virginia big-eared bat. The largest winter hibernation site in the world for the Virginia big-eared bat, Hellhole Cave, lies just a few miles east of the project site, on private land. The same cave is a major hibernating site for the Indiana bat. Late last month, lab results confirmed that white-nose syndrome, a disease that has been killing off bat populations throughout the Northeast United States, has now reached West Virginia. Both the proposed oil and gas drilling sites and the disease-stricken caves are in Pendleton County.

“Oil and gas drilling on the Monongahela National Forest, in combination with white-nose syndrome, presents a serious threat to the survival of the Virginia big-eared and Indiana bats,” said Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Drilling and disease are a one-two punch that could spell the absolute end of these bats.”

The groups protesting the lease sale and oil and gas drilling are the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of Blackwater, The Wilderness Society, Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, Friends of Allegheny Front, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, and the Laurel Mountain Preservation Association.

Judy Rodd, director of Friends of Blackwater, based in Charleston, West Virginia, said: “The proposed oil and gas drilling is the wrong project at the wrong place and time. The drilling could affect underground geology, harming caves where bats hibernate. The surface disturbance from the drilling could also damage and pollute bats’ summer habitats. Now that bats in Pendleton County are faced with white-nose syndrome, the worst threat to bats ever known, it is absolutely irresponsible to be considering going forward with this plan.”

The Bureau of Land Management, which administers oil and gas resources on federal lands, announced the lease auction on February 2. Along with the leases being offered for sale on the Monongahela, parcels on national forest lands in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Michigan are also up for bid. The auction is scheduled to take place March 19, at the Bureau’s Eastern States office in Springfield, Virginia.

Since 2006, white-nose syndrome has killed hundreds of thousands of wintering bats in caves and mines in New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New Hampshire. It is now suspected in Virginia, as well.

*Friends of Blackwater is a not-for-profit West Virginia membership organization devoted to preserving wilderness and wildlife; protecting the state's forests, parks, rivers, wild lands, unique habitats and endangered species; and fostering a land preservation ethic. It has over 10,000 members and supporters.*

*The Wilderness Society is a national nonprofit organization that works to protect America's wilderness and wildlife, and to develop a nationwide network of wild lands through public education, scientific analysis and advocacy. It has over 310,000 members.*

*The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 200,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.*

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